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## **The Open Factory Concept in Worker Recovered Businesses in Buenos Aires, Argentina**

Natasha vonKaenel, ISF Art and Social Movements, Summer 2014

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Hello everyone. My name is Natasha vonKaenel and I will be talking to you about two Argentine businesses taken over by their workers and the subsequent interactions they had with their local communities. For starters, what is the recovered factory movement?

At the end of the 90's in Argentina, the economy was crumbling, unemployment rates were high, and corrupt business owners were trying to run off with their business assets, while neglecting to pay their workers the wages they were owed. In response, workers occupied their workplaces, demanding unpaid wages; when the owners ignored their pleas, the workers decided to re-start production, and run the business as they had before, except this time with no bosses, as a worker-run occupied cooperative business (Vieta 2012, 4-5).

When the workers of the first recovered factory in Argentina, IMPA first decided to occupy their building in 1998, they were left alone at night, vulnerable to the police helicopters circling overhead (Vieta 2006). They needed help, and the idea came to open up their doors, and get a band together to play some music. There was tango dancing and lots of mate. The workers of IMPA may have initially thought that they were recovering the factory for themselves, but soon it became clear that it wasn't the workers that were recovering the business, it was the entire community. That's how *la fábrica abierta* or the open factory concept was born (Vieta 2013, 163).

The open factory concept became a model for how a recovered business should function differently than a capitalist enterprise. Whereas a capitalist factory is closed off from the community, recovered factory workers believe that they should open the factory to the community by holding different cultural events and providing services for the general public.

In an interview with Enrique Lopez, the theatre director of *Teatro Sanitario de Operaciones*, a theatre troupe that operates inside of IMPA, I asked him how people hear about the recovered factory. He looked directly at me, and smiled, then asked, "Why did you come to IMPA?" I sheepishly replied, "Well, for the Cultural Center." And he laughed and said, "What happened with you is what happens with the majority of people. No one comes here because they want an aluminum knob"—one of the products of IMPA's aluminum factory—"maybe they come here for the high school program, maybe they come here for the university, but in this stage of IMPA's development, what really communicates what IMPA is about is the Cultural Center." The focus of my project was to see if Enrique's assertion was correct.

How do people hear about the businesses that are part of the recovered businesses movement? How does having a robust Cultural Center or different political events help the recovered business workers, the community and the movement overall?

To gauge what people knew about the specific business, I conducted surveys of the general populace, compared the results of these surveys to the frequency of newspaper articles about each business, and conducted extensive interviews with both workers and attendees of cultural events.

The two businesses that I will be focusing on for this presentation are IMPA and Hotel B.A.U.E.N. IMPA was Argentina's first recovered business in 1998. It is a metal and aluminum factory of roughly 50 workers. However, roughly a hundred other people come in everyday to run and participate in different worker-run cooperatives out of its space. It is still an illegal occupation (Enrique Lopez, pers. comm.). Hotel B.A.U.E.N. is a hotel with over 160 workers. It was recovered in 2003. They are currently in a legal battle, after a court ruled this May to evict the workers from the property immediately (Alejandra Adesso, pers. comm.).

So I decided to focus on these two businesses because of the differences in the way that they interact with their local communities. While IMPA subscribes to the ideology of the open factory, Hotel B.A.U.E.N. has chosen to interact with the community in a different way. On any one week at IMPA, there will be two theatre productions; a couple of live music shows in their bar, which also functions as a gallery space; students coming in to participate in the accredited high school program or university program; both a radio station and a TV station broadcasting from the fourth floor; an exhibition in the museum; a health clinic open on Wednesdays; and 42 workshops offered throughout the week, including how to make a Congo drum, clown classes, tango lessons, philosophy discussions, yoga classes, and more. Workers estimate that in one year there are roughly 25,000-35,000 people who come in to use the services at IMPA (Gez 2014). They also hold large festivals, for events like National Workers Day in May, New Years Eve, and Day of the Children.

The situation at Hotel B.A.U.E.N. is a little bit different. While they agree with the ideology of the open factory concept, the main way that they bring people into their space is by being a hotel, and allowing political allies and other allied organizations to use their auditorium free of charge for press conferences and political debates. They have roughly 3-4 events of this nature in their auditorium each week (Maria Delvalle, pers. comm). In the past they also had a working theatre, which showed plays about the hotel itself and anarchy, but that is currently inactive. They also have sometimes hosted music festivals out in the streets outside the hotel, and have helped create a documentary about their struggle, which travels the country (Fabian Pierucci, pers. comm.).

While Hotel B.A.U.E.N. may seem like it is doing something similar by allowing allied organizations to use its space, the scope of what IMPA is doing, and the scope of what Hotel B.A.U.E.N. is doing are different. IMPA has created a consistent community that regularly comes back to use their space, whereas the people that attend events at Hotel B.A.U.E.N., are either necessarily transient, due to the fact that they are hotel guests, or are members of the press, or are coming to see an event due to their interest in

a specific political organization. The two communities do have some similarities, but they are not exactly the same.

This brings me to the results of my survey. Hotel B.A.U.E.N. was the most well known recovered business out of the ones I surveyed, with roughly 91% of people I surveyed who were aware of the recovered factory movement, also knowing about Hotel B.A.U.E.N. Roughly 19% of people who didn't even know about the recovered factory movement, knew about Hotel B.A.U.E.N., because it was a famous hotel even before it was recovered, it was built during the years of the dictatorship as a symbol of Argentina's prosperity.

IMPA was the second most well known, with 70% of the people who were aware of the recovered factory movement, also knowing about IMPA. So that brings us to the question of what do people know about each factory? Roughly 84% of the people who were aware of Hotel B.A.U.E.N. were also aware of events that were put on by the hotel. 87% of people who were aware of IMPA also knew about the Cultural Center at IMPA and the events hosted there.

What makes these statistics particularly interesting is how they relate to the amount of information that the general populace gets about each factory. In a thorough analysis of one of the biggest newspapers in Buenos Aires, La Prensa, looking at articles from 1998-2014, there were 43 articles about events and issues at Hotel B.A.U.E.N. compared to only one about IMPA. Although IMPA has many more events per week, and more people coming in to use the facilities than Hotel B.A.U.E.N., Hotel B.A.U.E.N.'s press conferences and political events have led to greater coverage in the media, due to the time sensitive and politically relevant nature of the events they generally put on. Therefore, the results of the survey about community awareness seem to imply that the media coverage generated by the politically oriented events of Hotel B.A.U.E.N. is roughly equivalent to the word of mouth coverage generated by the culturally oriented events of IMPA, which I think is quite a feat for IMPA.

Many of the workers, both at IMPA and Hotel B.A.U.E.N., assert that this community awareness and presence functions as a type of protection for their occupations, which brings me to my next research question, how has the involvement of the community impacted the recovered businesses. Having community presence manifests itself as protection in two different ways. The simple fact of having more people than just the workers in the building ensures that the workers literally have protection, in case something gets messy with the police. But it also functions as political protection.

However, this is where the situations at the two businesses begin to diverge. The workers of Hotel B.A.U.E.N. are on the verge of eviction, and everyone I spoke to, inside and outside of Hotel B.A.U.E.N., were unsure about the future. They know that they have the support of the community, but they don't know if it will be enough.

But when I spoke with workers at IMPA about the threat of eviction, they laughed. They know that no judge or politician wants to be the one to shut down IMPA. The difference? According to the IMPA workers, the ties with the community are strong, the workshops, and the health clinic, these are all important, but the thing that carries the most political weight is the school. No politician wants to shut down a functioning high

school, especially not the only high school in the area that can actually get kids from the slums to come to class. Enrique Lopez says the kids come because, “IMPA has good vibes.”

Finally, I found that simply choosing to engage with the community in different ways helped to challenge the cultural hegemony of capitalist production. The workers at both Hotel BA.U.E.N. and IMPA ensure that before every event, regardless of what it is, a worker gets up and speaks for a few minutes about their business’ history and the programs that it offers to the community. That history which is shared over and over is what truly makes these spaces different from just a regular community center. Many attendees that I interviewed told me that the first time they learned about the recovered factory movement was at one of these community events. And since then, they continued to return, one woman going on to teach an aerial silk class, a skill she had learned in one of IMPA’s own workshops, another having her art displayed in IMPA’s gallery, and still others learning how to make their first Congo drums, and planning to do more.

Both IMPA and Hotel B.A.U.E.N. help foster community growth, particularly by groups that challenge the capitalist system, the radio station, theatre groups and TV station at IMPA, and the political organizations that hold events at Hotel B.A.U.E.N., by simply giving them space, for free which is one of the most important things that any community needs to grow. This shows that while these cultural and political events provide protection, literally and politically, they also completely change the relationship between worker and community. They are not separate entities like in a capitalist system. At these recovered businesses, they are one and the same.

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